"Life to him would be death to me": 
The Romantic Struggle against the Miltonic Legacy in John Keats's *Hyperion*

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Synopsis

*Hyperion* constitutes Keats's ambition to adopt the high style of epic poetry, a challenging presence for English poets versed in Virgil and Homer, and for whom Milton's *Paradise Lost* remained the form's most formidable English legacy. Undeniably, *Hyperion* sustains the characteristic Miltonic qualities of diction, versification, the sublime, and moral absolutes. However, when Keats gave up completing the *Hyperion* poems, he explained to J. H. Reynolds in a letter of 21 September 1819, his abandonment of the *Hyperion* project by lamenting: “I have given up Hyperion—there were too many Miltonic inversions in it—Miltonic verse cannot be written but in an artful or rather artist's humour” (*Letters* 2.167). Certainly, Keats's adoption of Miltonic verse distanced him from his own epic venture, and instead liberated him in an ambivalent but positive engagement with Miltonic style.

The serious attempt to appropriate Milton's authoritative text allowed Keats the possibility to generate his own modern epic, transcending the limits of vision as prescribed by conventional literary criteria. Celebrating Milton's sublime imagery, Keats embraced both the passion and intensity of the sensuous imagery of *Paradise Lost*. As Keats proclaims in the “Marginalia”: “Milton in every instance pursues his imagination to the utmost” (344). It was the Miltonic imagination that Keats was to qualify in his own pursuit and speculations, and which was eventually to attain the intensity of the pictorial and corporeal imagery of *Hyperion*. In the refinement of Milton's epic, speculation becomes a vital Keatsian term, as in the Miltonic physicality of the Titans and Apollo, and the envisaging of their sublime agony. The great pathos of the visual and corporeal imagery surrounding the Titans witnesses Keats's celebration and subversion of the Miltonic legacy.

[ 49 ]
The marginalia in John Keats's copy of *Paradise Lost* regarding Milton's gift for the sublime mark a clear admiration for the great epic. He goes so far as to declare: "Milton is godlike in the sublime pathetic."\(^1\) Keats was to gauge the antithesis between the sublime and the pathetic as one of the greatest qualities of *Paradise Lost*, and it is from this judgment that the tension between the pathetic and sensuous imagery and the moral rigor of *Hyperion* were to emerge. By appropriating the passion and visual intensity of *Paradise Lost*, Keats renders the sensual imagery of the fallen Titans in their sublime agony.

Yet, famously, Keats wrestled with Miltonic blank verse in the creation of *Hyperion* and lamented over the project: "Life to him would be death to me."\(^2\) The tone here embraces the Miltonic legacy, while at the same time struggling to marginalize it. *Hyperion*, as Keats's revision of *Paradise Lost*, epitomizes a poetic endeavour in which the poet's unique voice could be realized while shedding the seeming burden of Milton's triumph.

The ambitious fragment of *Hyperion* marks Keats's intentions for a great artistic development—from *Endymion* to the *Hyperion* poems—and the higher ambition to secure a place in poetic tradition. However, the excessive force of the pictorial and corporeal imagery in the descriptions of the Titans runs counter to the "judicious obscurity" appropriate to the Burkean definition of a Miltonic style.\(^3\) Keats's epic might well have aimed to control its sensuous and visual imagery to attain Miltonic aesthetics, but the sense of spectacle in *Hyperion* is at odds with the abstract rigors of *Paradise Lost*.

In this paper, I will focus on Keats's challenge to the conservatively entertained expectations for an epic style, and argue that Keats subversively promoted an original and radical poetics of visuality.\(^4\) The innovative qualities of his imaginative speculations will be considered as a reflection of the Romantic struggle against the legacy of Miltonic epic.
By the late eighteenth century, Milton’s poetry was firmly established in the English literary canon, playing a decisive part in the formulation of “national poetry.” Throughout the Romantic period, *Paradise Lost* was centrally instituted as the pivotal work to uphold the epic tradition inherited from Virgil and Homer, and the style culminating definitively in Milton’s poem required an epic to have a solemn grandeur to the degree that the term “Miltonic” was synonymous with “sublime,” a situation invoked by Byron in his own epic, *Don Juan*.

However, beyond mere imitation and pastiche, the Romantic poets attempted the transformation of Milton’s epic sublime into their own modern form, appropriating the “pathetic” realm of passion and intensity in *Paradise Lost* (“Marginalia” 341). Indeed, a surfeit of prolonged and laborious epics emerged in the early nineteenth century, with the form giving way to a more impassioned mode of poetry, as in Leigh Hunt’s bower of feverish love in *The Story of Rimini*. The epic, as a genre where artistic potential could be tested and explored, is crucial for an understanding of the Romantic conception of originality.

In this vein, the creation of *Hyperion* may not only be regarded as Keats’s ambitious attempt to situate himself in the epic tradition, but also as his own personal challenge in the creation of a modern epic. In his wish for “a more naked and grecian Manner” (*Letters* 1.207), *Hyperion* seems to be specified generically as epic, and is certainly one of Keats’s most Miltonic poems. Indeed, the Miltonics—of diction, versification, the sublime, and moral absolutes—risk dominating this great fragment, which at the outset establishes a war between the Titans and the Olympians, and offers the initial figuration of the “frozen” Saturn in a secluded realm of fallen gods (*Hyperion* 1.87):

Deep in the shady sadness of a vale
Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
Far from the fiery noon, and eve’s one star,
Sat grey-haired Saturn, quiet as a stone,
Still as the silence round about his lair;

*(Hyperion* 1.1–5)
“[T]here is an air of grandeur,” and “it opens in a striking manner,” remarked the *Edinburgh Magazine* in 1820 of this sublime chasmic landscape. The postponed deployment of the predicate “sat” in line 4 emphasizes the seclusion of Saturn’s “lair” (5) after the sequence “Deep” (1), “Far sunken” (2), and “Far from” (3), as in Book II of *Paradise Lost*, where “High” (1), “Outshon” (2), “gorgeous” (3), and “Kings” (4) embellish the simple observation that Satan “sat”.

High on a Throne of Royal State, which far
Outshon the wealth of Ormus and of Ind,
Or where the gorgeous East with richest hand
Showrs on her Kings Barbaric Pearl & Gold,
Satan exalted sat, by merit rais’d
To that bad eminence; (2.1-6)

Although Saturn is “grey-haired” (*Hyperion* 1.4) and with pathos manifest in his statuesque silence where Satan is “exalted” (*Paradise Lost* 2.5), *Hyperion*’s opening lines attain the tonal and rhetorical grandeur of *Paradise Lost*. Yet, the majority of contemporary reviewers considered *Hyperion* as being a deviation from the literary criteria for epic, lamenting that it “is continually shocking our ideas of poetical decorum, at the very time when we are acknowledging the hand of genius.” Keats had transgressed in that the poem’s imaginings boldly ran counter to “old opinions” (*Monthly Review*, qtd. in Matthews 160). This criticism can be attributed to the sentiment that epic was considered as grounded in literary criteria long established as akin to the “doctrine” of “religion.” Moreover, accompanying the antipathy of the contemporary reviewers is their self-conscious assumption of judicial roles as arbiters of literary taste, and the frequency of the claims that Keats’s poem ran counter to their ideas of poetic decorum substantiates the degree of *Hyperion*’s subversive potential.

The Romantic poets wrestled artistically with the period’s formal expectations, which were incompatible with any manifesto for an innovative aesthetic. In the 1802 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth explained the purpose of experiment by suggesting that his poetry is risking disengagement from its readership, having destabilized “certain known habits of association”:
It is supposed, that by the act of writing in verse an Author makes a formal engagement that he will gratify certain known habits of association, . . . I will not take upon me to determine the exact import of the promise which by the act of writing in verse an Author in the present day makes to his Reader; but I am certain it will appear to many persons that I have not fulfilled the terms of an engagement thus voluntarily contracted.\textsuperscript{14}

To achieve a “voluntarily” shared consensus, poetry was supposed to fulfill a “promise” as if formally obligated. Just as judicial and commercial contracts function respectively in courts and in trade, so a literary contract was implicitly prescribed for the relationship between reader and poet. This illuminates the age’s authorized definitions of taste, which Wordsworth believed that the poet cultivates to represent his readers, and which were exalted through the relationship between the poet and the reader. However, this relationship was problematized dramatically when periodical reviewers claimed their legitimacy of taste over the innovative modes of poetry, disrupting the shared territory previously inhabited with relative harmony by both reviewer and poet.

Francis Jeffrey’s criticisms of Southey’s epic \textit{Thalaba} in the 1802 \textit{Edinburgh Review} were dedicated to establishing the eternal verities: “Poetry has this much, at least, in common with religion, that its standards were fixed long ago” (63). “System,” “model,” “principle,” “doctrine,” “standard” are implemented as the operative terms of judgment with which to denounce Southey’s modern epic as an instance of “false taste” (\textit{Edinburgh Review} 63–64). Also raising its voice as an arbiter of literary taste, the inaugural issue of \textit{The Anti-Jacobin Weekly Examiners} in 1799 posits itself as a trustworthy agent of “some public channel of information” on which readers could “confidently rely for forming their opinion.”\textsuperscript{15} These periodicals stood in self-proclaimed defense of “the old models” (\textit{Edinburgh Review} 64) and in open condemnation of “wild and unshackled freedom of thought, which rejects all habit, all wisdom of former times, all restraints of ancient usage, and of local attachment” (\textit{The Anti-Jacobin Weekly Examiners} 3).\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, in 1799 the \textit{Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine} defined what the epic should take as its subject matter: the “established rule for epic, that the subject be national, is, surely, founded on true patriotism.”\textsuperscript{17} As Homer’s patriotic
and "inspiring" verse illustrates, the epic was considered to address the vital "public lesson" of patriotism. William Hayley in his Essay on Epic Poetry celebrates Homer's absolute achievement in the creation of poetry for the Greek nation:

And haply Greece, the Wonder of the Earth
For feats of martial fire and civic worth,
That glorious Land, of noblest minds the nurse,
Owes her unrivall'd race to thy inspiring Verse;
For O, what Greek, who in his youthful vein
Had felt thy soul-invigorating strain,
Who that had caught, amid the festive throng,
The public lesson of thy patriot Song,
Could ever cease to feel his bosom swell
With zeal to dare, and passion to excel. (2.87-96)

The "old models" insisted on narratives of national heroes, on taking pride in one's home culture, and of respecting the benefits of historical wisdom (Edinburgh Review 64).

However, by way of willed opposition, the Romantic poets attempted the redefinition of epic as a new kind of poetry which included innovative lyrical passion and intensity, rather than the archetypal features of former epics; Milton's achievement was to be assimilated and modified, rather than merely regurgitated as national pride.

II

The distinctness of Milton's imagination was admired by William Hazlitt, who argued that Milton "refines on his descriptions of beauty; loading sweets on sweets, till the sense aches at them; and raises his images of terror to a gigantic elevation, that 'makes Ossa like a wart.'" Moreover, emphasizing Milton's sensuousness, Hazlitt conceives of taste in poetry as "gusto":

Milton has great gusto. He repeats his blow twice; grapples with and exhausts his subject. His imagination has a double relish of its objects, an inveterate attachment to the things he describes, and to the words describing them. ("On Gusto" 4.79-80)
The intriguing formulation of “gusto” reveals how the established criteria for the epic cannot in truth even frame a definition of Milton’s passion and intensity.

To Milton’s “logic of passion,” Coleridge ascribed the sublime aesthetics in *Paradise Lost*, arguing that the “sublimest parts are the revelations of Milton’s own mind, producing itself and evolving its own greatness.” Such epic passion articulates a “universal logic” (*Criticism* 164), as observed by Coleridge, who championed the superiority of *Paradise Lost* over Homer:

In Homer, the supposed importance of the subject, as the first effort of confederated Greece, is an after-thought of the critics; and the interest, such as it is, derived from the events themselves, as distinguished from the manner of representing them, is very languid to all but Greeks. It is a Greek poem. The superiority of the Paradise Lost is obvious in this respect, that the interest transcends the limits of a nation. . . . [It] is wider than Christendom. . . . Still further . . . it contains matter of deep interest to all mankind, as forming the basis of all religion, and the true occasion of all philosophy whatsoever. (*Criticism* 161)

For Coleridge, all humanity may reside within Milton’s moral and intellectual schema, while for Hazlitt and Coleridge lyrical passion and intensity are the means to displace the strictures laid down for poetry and personified in the national icon of Milton.

Keats enlarged on Hazlitt’s perspective in his remark that Milton “had an exquisite passion for what is properly, in the sense of ease and pleasure poetical Luxury” ("Marginalia" 336), which are embedded in Milton’s richer imagery. As Beth Lau points out, Keats’s underlinings predominantly stress descriptive passages of sensory detail rather than direct speech, and clearly bear witness to an interest in the descriptive power of spectacle. The force of Milton’s sensory images is revealed in his pursuit of “the Extreme” of an unregulated (“Marginalia” 336), expansive vision to the extent that “nothing” but Milton’s high speculations can “express the sensation” (“Marginalia” 341).

Speculation becomes a vital term in Keats’s exploration of the function of the imagination. According to the *OED* (2nd ed.), speculate can be traced etymologically to its Latin root *speculat*, meaning to spy out and to observe, and it also possesses various connotations of vision.
As Lisa Heiserman Perkins relates, "in Keats's day the word still retained the strong literal connotations" bearing an archaic definition of the "faculty or power of seeing, sight, vision, esp. intelligent or comprehending vision."24 The application of the term in the Romantic context invokes the physical act of seeing alongside the abstraction of philosophical and abstract thought. In the famous letter on "wordsworthian or egotistical sublime," Keats specifies the function of speculation:

What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. (Letters 1.387)

Where the virtuous philosopher or philosophical poet will distill their identity into a representative model for the reader and contrive "a palpable design upon us" in their work (Letters 1.224), for Keats, the poet should embrace both the dark and bright sides of his experience and suspend reason by piercing beneath moral particularities in the forceful representation of vision. Ultimately, the "excellence of every Art is its intensity" due to "any momentous depth of speculation excited, in which to bury its repulsiveness" (Letters 1.192).

Keats's speculative mind imbues a deeper significance to the power of sight, delighting in the visual imagery of poetry attaining "the Extreme," and aspiring to "as high a summit in Poetry as the nerve bestowed upon" him "will suffer" (Letters 1.387), following Hazlitt's definition of Miltonic imagination. The poet's imagination functions, then, "till the sense aches at them" ("On Shakespeare and Milton" 5.58). Simultaneously, beyond the pleasure-seeking indulgence of plucking "a posy / Of luxuries bright, milky, soft and rosy" ("I stood tip-toe upon a little hill" 27–28), Keats considers the speculating mind as something with which the poet "martyrs himself to the human heart" (Letters 1.278–79).25 Therefore, it is crucial for Keats to describe the universality of the extreme emotion of epic through the particularities of the senses.

However, speculation has the potential of naturally resulting in "wild and unshackled freedom of thought" (The Anti-Jacobin Weekly Examiner 3). When Hyperion was criticized by some contemporary reviewers, Keats's imaginative practice was derided in epithets such as "wild," "misdirected," "reckless," and "miserably misapplied," and was
considered to have an unregulated and inflated function. Keats's excessive and sensuous poetry was witnessed as confronting the contemporary aesthetic code, which emphasized moderation and restraint as virtuous and appropriate. The neo-classical doctrine of moderation, which the Hunt circle caustically dubbed the taste of the French school, became the conservative literary context in which the second generation of Romantic poets tried to evolve a more liberated mode of poetry.

Moreover, this illegitimate assault on contemporary expectations for poetic style makes a stark contrast with the "judicious obscurity" synonymous with the Burkean judiciousness:

No person seems better to have understood the secret of heightening, or of setting terrible things, if I may use the expression, in their strongest light, by the force of a judicious obscurity, than Milton. His description of Death in the second book is admirably studied; it is astonishing with what a gloomy pomp, with what a significant and expressive uncertainty of strokes and colouring he has finished the portrait of the king of terrors. (Burke, _A Philosophical Enquiry_ 59)

Burke was in favour of regulating the visually oriented imagination, which was considered to prevent poetic imagery from developing into the obscurity necessary for sublime in its generation of over-vivid depictions. Restraining forceful visual imagery by its sublimation in abstract morality, Burke promoted "judicious obscurity" as the authoritative standard of sublime aesthetics (_A Philosophical Enquiry_ 59). The spectacular imagery in _Hyperion_ adapted from Milton retains the graphic force of epic, and is therefore at odds with the Burkean aesthetic code of obscurity, confronting conventional taste in its commitment "to the Extreme" of pictorialism ("Marginalia" 336).

III

In Keats's epic venture, the excessive appeal of pictorial richness and corporeality in the imagery of the Titans and Apollo resides at the center of _Hyperion_. For example, the spectacle of Egyptian architecture in Hyperion's palace was praised by Leigh Hunt as "the core and inner diamond of the poem":27
His palace bright,
Bastioned with pyramids of glowing gold,
And touched with shade of bronzèd obelisks,
Glared a blood-red through all its thousand courts,
Arches, and domes, and fiery galleries;

(Hyperion 1.176–80)

While Miltonic inversions and revisited vocabulary attest to a formative influence on Keats's epic, the emphatic rhetoric of the visual imagery transgresses the principles of moderation and restraint recommended for epic style, as in the highly embellished figure of Apollo in Book III:

Soon wild commotions shook him, and made flush
All the immortal fairness of his limbs—
Most like the struggle at the gate of death;
Or liker still to one who should take leave
Of pale immortal death, and with a pang
As hot as death's is chill, with fierce convulse
Die into life.

(Hyperion 3.124–30)

At the centre of Apollo's struggle the body is rendered replete in a sensational perception. In particular, "commotions" (124), "flush" (124) and "convulse" (129) draw on physiological discourse and its annotation of the body. In the conception of the heavy physicality of the Titans, Keats expands his vocabulary to encompass a medical and scientific manner in which repulsive bodies are revealed:

Dungeonèd in opaque element, to keep
Their clenchedèd teeth still clenched, and all their limbs
Locked up like veins of mental, cramped and screwed;
Without a motion, save of their big hearts
Heaving in pain, and horribly convulsèd
With sanguine feverous boiling gurge of pulse.

(Hyperion 2.23–28)

Keatsian speculation divests the divine figures of the Titans of their immortality, and they emerge rather as palpable, visible human bodies. Images of pain are inscribed in the internal space of the body through a kind of medical super-sight which grants access to the complex physiological network of the "nerve" (1.175), "pulse" (2.28), "veins" (2.25), and "hearts"
Specifically through the functioning nerves, the aching consciousness of life is intimated: the fallen Titans are "nerveless" (1.18), "listless" (1.18), "dead" (1.18) "as a stone" (1.4), and the "horrors portioned to a giant nerve / Oft mad Hyperion ache" (1.175-76).

Moreover, aspiring beyond the confines of the body, Keats speculates on the mind as Apollo reads a "wondrous lesson" (3.112) in Mnemosyne's face and "Knowledge enormous" (3.113) is poured into "the wide hollows" (3.117) of the young god's "brain" (3.117). While Milton strains his eyes for the celestial and terrestrial spheres in his "span in immensity" ("Marginalia" 336), Keats casts an eye at "the wide hollows" (3.117) of the body, and searches for the nerves and fibers through which the poet finds the zones of pain and pleasure. Ultimately, both Milton's ethereal and Keats's corporeal realms gain their own unique legitimacy in their fascination with visions empirically embraced. Keats remarks:

Milton in every instance pursues his imagination to the utmost—he is "sagacious of his Quarry," he sees Beauty on the wing, pounces upon it and gorges it to the producing his essential verse. ("Marginalia" 344)

Keats recognizes that Milton's high speculations are rooted in physicality as a result of a distinct conception of narrative sight. In the same way, Keats's insights expand and deepen "to the Extreme," in the sublime agony of the Titans as opposed to their radiant dignity.

Significantly, in Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France, the term speculation has visual connotations as well as referring pejoratively to finance. According to Burkean discourse, "sublime speculations" are apt to lead to the "hypocrisy" which clings to "a very trivial interest." Speculations without decent regulation tend to be limited to one's "own private speculations" and the individual's "own private interests" (Burke, Reflections 77), a judgment which hardens in the adjectival flourish condemning the "shallow speculations of the petulant, assuming, shortsighted coxcombs" (Burke, Reflections 52). Burke's argument is inseparable from the general national distrust of the venturesome philosophies considered to haunt the French Revolution, and after which he institutes the reactionary perspective of conflict between higher reasoning and "shallow," obsession with "private interests."29

Intriguingly, in The Fall of Hyperion—Keats's recasting of Hyperion
there is further rehearsal of the Burkean discourse connecting short-sighted speculation and private interest in Moneta’s speech: “Thou art a dreaming thing, / A fever of thyself. Think of the earth;” (The Fall 1.168–69). The poet is admonished, here, due to his short-sightedness, and his “dull mortal eyes” (The Fall 1.247); he cannot be “free from speculating on creations” of his own “brain” (Letters 1.387). Therefore, the poet is urged to embrace “enormous ken / To see as a god sees, and take the depth / Of things as nimbly as the outward eye / Can size and shape pervade” (The Fall 1.303–06). The vision which the poet attains through “enormous ken” (The Fall 1.303) is the agony of the Titans as “the depth / Of things” (The Fall 1.304–05); this precedes the eventual dedication to examining the limits of speculation on the human heart and to conceiving an alternative human pathos.

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Notes


2 Hyder E. Rollins, ed., The Letters of John Keats 1814–1821, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958) 212. Subsequent references to Keats’s letters will be cited in the text with the abbreviation Letters, followed by volume and page number. In the letter to J. H. Reynolds of 21 September 1819, Keats wrote: “I have given up Hyperion—there were too many Miltonic inversions in it—Miltonic verse cannot be written but in an artful or rather artist’s humour” (2.167). Three days later, he said, “Life to him would be death to me.” Keats was troubled chiefly by the demands of Miltonic blank verse and poetic idiom, and far less concerned with Miltonic theme.


4 On my more specific remarks on the relationship between Keats’s visual


8 Miriam Allott, ed., The Poems of John Keats (London: Longman, 1970) 401. All references to Keats’s poetry are from this edition. Subsequent citations will be referenced by book and line number.


12 Edinburgh Review, October 1802, 63.


24 Perkins 60.


27 *The Indicator*, 1820, qtd. in Matthews 174.
